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ABSTRACT

Defensiveness is the most frequently utilized concept to explain iradequate change on the part of consultees. Defensiveness, in this context, indicates a motive to protect a central ccmponent of the self-concept, or a motive to present oneself favorably. Another source of consultee resistance to change results from the limitations of the human cognitive apparatus. Some of these limitaticns include: (1) the lack of a conscious awareness of higher mental processes: (2) disproportional cognitive availability of vivid events: (3) fundamental attribution error: and (4) other memory-related factors. While the defensiveness hypothesis assigns blame to the consultee for consultation failure, cognitive explanations do not, and tend to lead to changes in consultant behavior designed to circumvent these limitations. (Author/NRB)

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COGNITIVE FACTORS IN CONSULTEE DEFENSIVENESS

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Cognitive Factors in Consultee Defensiveness

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Most conceptualizations of consultation process developed by mental health professionals have borrowed heavily from models of the therapy process (e.g. Caplan, 1970; Dinkmeyer and Carlson, 1973). Terminology has been adjusted to deal with a particular writer's beliefs about the difference between therapy and consultation, but much of the conceptual baggage has simply been transferred from the therapy to the consultation situation.

One example of this transfer is the utilization of the concept of defensiveness to explain consultee reluctance to change. Defensiveness in this context is most often utilized to indicate a motive to protect some central component of the person's conception of himself, or a motive to present himself in the best possible light. It is the author's view that, while such self-serving motives undoubtedly are factors in some situations in which consultee's resist change, they represent only a partial explanation of these phenomena. Further, the utilization of defensiveness by the consultant to explain his failure is particularly pernicious. It has the effect of assigning blame to the consultee and has the tendency to destroy the equal status relationship which is the cornerstone of consultation theory.

It is the purpose of the present paper to outline one set of alternative explanations for consultee reluctance to change based on the limitations of the human cognitive apparatus. Five such cognitive factors will be discussed. They are selected from a broad array of such factors and should be considered as only exemplars not as representative of the array.

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Montreal, 1980.

Factor 1 -- Lack of conscious awareness of higher mental process

A major overriding limitation of the human cognitive apparatus is that it is usable to sense its own functions. In reviewing evidence related to this problem, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) state that "research has made it increasingly clear that there is almost no conscious awareness of perceptual and memorial processes (pg. 232)". If a person is asked to state his phone number, for example, he will usually be able to do so, but if he is asked to say how he was able to remember it, he normally is unable to give an adequate answer. People attempt explanation of these processes, but such explanations are most often cultural or subcultural a priori theories about how things are remembered and may bear little or no relationship to the actual process involved. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) present evidence that problem solving, judgment, choice, and influence, in addition to memory, occur in relative unawareness to the individual.

To illustrate how such a lack of awareness could effect the consultation process, consider the following example: Mrs. Jones has a cousin she has never seen who has had a history of emotional disturbance. One of this cousin's behavioral characteristics is that as a child she was very shy and currently, according to reports of family members, has difficulty maintaining eye contact during conversation. In family gatherings the subject of emotional disturbance comes up and family members give a variety of opinions on the subject including numerous examples from their experience regarding the relationship between eye contact, shyness, and emotional disturbance.

Mrs. Jones is a teacher and into her class comes Suzy who is relatively shy and does not look at Mrs. Jones when she addresses her. Based on this observation and incidents of unhappiness in the classroom, Mrs. Jones

refers Suzy to the school psychologist. When the school psychologist asks Mrs. Jones why Suzy was referred, she recites a litany of examples of disturbed behavior.

Mrs. Jones has a cognitive schema (i.e. a relatively stable conception of a cause-effect relationship) that shy people often are emotionally disturbed, and she seeks confirmation of this schema by being particularly vigilant about incidents of disturbance in children such as Suzy who are shy or have poor eye contact. Mrs. Jones may be unaware of how this schema was formed, and how it led her to selective perceptions which formed the basis of her impressions of Suzy. It is important to note that Mrs. Jones is behaving rationally, given her experience. To the extent to which Mrs. Jones is unaware of her own cognitive processes (i.e. bases of formation of the schema, selective perception based on the schema, enhanced memory of incidents supporting the schema, etc.) any attempt to point out the erroneous nature of the schema runs head long into reasonable and logical deductions she has formed based on her experience. Such a lack of awareness, then, is sufficient cause for consultee resistive behavior.

Factor 2 -- <u>Once coded in memory, outcomes become independent of the circumstances in which they arise</u>

In a point related to the issue just discussed, Ross and colleagues (e.g. Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975) found that once an impression was formed it was difficult to change even when the subject was told that the data on which the impression was based had been experimentally manipulated; that is, the data provided bore no relationship to task performance or any characteristics of the participants. The researchers postulated that these impressions persisted for two reasons: First, the data once processed

in memory forms a cause-effect schema and this schema is held in long term memory while the circumstances from which the data came is forgotten. Thus, the credibility, validity, and reliability of the data on which the schema is based is forgotten once the schema is formed. Second, persons tend to accept at face value new data that supports the now formed schema, but tends to be quite vigilant about the credibility, reliability and validity of evidence that does not coincide with the schema.

Going back to the example of Mrs. Jones and Suzy, Mrs. Jones feels that children who are shy are prone to emotional disturbance. This notion may have resulted from conversations with family members who have only known one disturbed child, who have only seen this child on a few occasions, and who are known to exaggerate for the sake of good conversation. However, Mrs. Jones may not remember the source of the data making up her impression and she is unlikely to be able to evaluate from memory the validity of the data. If a consultant appearing on the scene were to present to Mrs. Jones a research report which was based on hundreds of children which shows that of all children who are shy, very few are emotionally disturbed, she might be inclined to question the geographical and social economic representativeness of the sample or to criticize the criterion utilized to designate the children emotionally disturbed. Further, if another teacher in casual conversation expressed a view that supported Mrs. Jones contention about shyness and emotional disturbance, the credibility, validity and reliability of that data would generally go unquestioned. Ross (1978a) points out that even random evidence (randomized in terms of support for the impression) could be used to strengthen an impression given these tendencies.

Such tendencies based on the manner in which data is coded in memory provide another example of how cognitive factors rather than motivational ones, can explain consultee reluctance to change.

Factor III -- Disproportional cognitive availability of vivid events

"Vivid events are, almost by definition, disproportionately available both in ititial perception and again in recall" (Ross, 1978a, pg. 389). Although it is not clear exactly what factors make material vivid as subjectively evaluated by the observer, it is probable that events that are directly witnessed, events which have outcome relevance for the observer, and events which produce strong affective responses are more vivid than events that do not have these components. This line of reasoning indicates that persons tend to weight evidence they have directly perceived more heavily than evidence reported by others. This tendency often makes the consultant's task more difficult.

Mr. Smith attempted to implement an operant based behavior management procedure for a difficult child two years ago. Unfortunately, the remediation effort ran into difficulty. Some other children in the classroom asked why Johnny was receiving tokens for appropriate behavior, while they did not receive anything for the same behavior. They talked to their parents about this and Mr. Smith had several phone calls from concerned parents. For this reason and others, he terminated the project before it had an appreciable effect on Johnny's behavior.

Now Mrs. Anderson, the school psychologist assigned to a referral of Mr. Smith's, feels that in the current case a behavior management program could be beneficial. She realizes that Mr. Smith had a difficult experience with one such project in the past, but she is quite familiar with the behavior management literature supporting the technique she plans to use, and

she even established such a program in another class in Mr. Smith's school which was successful. Her plan of action then is to report on her experiences and to quote the literature on the subject in the hope of changing the teacher's impressions regarding operant based behavior management techniques.

A rational analysis could lead the consultant to believe that if she can present several examples of successful applications of the technique it will outweigh the one negative experience of the consultee. However, the vividness of the failure experience in the consultee's memory may be sufficient to overwhelm all the positive evidence presented. This enhanced cognitive availability, in and of itself, or in combination with other cognitive factors like those previously mentioned, could be sufficiently strong to result in the consultee refusal to attempt the consultant's suggested remedial strategy.

Factor IV -- The fundamental attribution error

An extensive research tradition in attribution theory shows that actors in a situation attribute the causes of their behavior to different causes than observers of the actors behavior (Ross, 1978a; Wegner & Vallacher, 1977). More precisely, actors tend to feel that their behavior was determined by environmental events, while observers tend to attribute the actors' behavior to internal traits or dispositions of the actor. For example, it has been demonstrated that teachers (observers of student behavior) tend to attribute student failure to traits of students such as poor academic potential, neurologically based learning disabilities, or poor achievement motivation (Medway, 1979). Students (actors in the learning situation), on the other hand, tend to feel that their poor performance is due to situational variables, such as poor teaching, the presence of distracting students, poor curriculum, etc.

It is important to point out that students and teachers do not come to these attributions simply because they want to assign bleme for failure to the other party. There are cognitive reasons for such actor-observer attribution differences. Wegner and Vallacher (1977) outline several such reasons including the following: The student (the actor in this case) knows how he behaves in other situations and realizes that in some situations he learns well (e.g. in street games with other children, helping his father fix the car, in other classes). Therefore, when he behaves differently in one particular class, he logically attributes this behavior to some peculiarity of that class situation, a situational attribution. The teacher, on the other hand, does not know how this student learns in other situations. He does know, however, that most children learn well in his class. Therefore, the teacher logically is forced to the conclusion that the reason for a particular student's behavior resides in some peculiarity of that student.

When the consultant comes into a situation of student failure, he immediately has the problem that the two parties concerned tend to have different explanation of the causes of the problem behavior. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the consultant, being human, tends to make the same attribution errors that others make. In the consultation situation, the consultee is actor and the consultant is observer. If the teacher-consultee while describing the problem mentions any behavior, attitude, or opinion that the consultant finds unusual or contrary to his beliefs, or behaves in a peculiar manner in the consultation situation (e.g. is overly emotional in describing the problem with the student) the consultant will tend to make a dispositional or trait attribution to the consultee, regarding the causes of this behavior. The consultant then tends to tie this

casual attribution to the problem the consultee is having with the student. For example, the consultant may feel that the consultee is describing apparently minor learning problems of a particular student with undue emotional intensity. As he gets to know the consultee better, he finds that one of the consultee's own children has learning problems and thus forms the hypothesis that the consultee is overidentified with the student, and is exaggerating the extent of the student's learning problems.

A real problem now arises. The student attributes his learning problem to some aspect of the learning environment, perhaps to the teacher. This implies certain types of remedial suggestions. The teacher attributes the problem to a trait of the student, perhaps poor academic potential, which implies another type of remedial procedure. Finally, the consultant attributes the causes of the problem primarily to inappropriate emotional involvement on the part of the consultee resulting from overidentification, which, of course, implies still another type of remedial suggestion. Under such circumstances, consultee resistance to consultant suggestions for remediation appears certain.

It is perhaps worthy of note in passing that defensiveness is an attribution made by consultants to consultees when consultees resist consultant suggestions for change. It should be clear to the reader at this point that such an attribution follows the pattern described above. That is, the consultee (the actor) tends to attribute his resistance to the fact that the consultant's suggestions don't coincide with his (the consultee's) understanding of the problem. This is a situational attribution. The consultant (the observer) tends to attribute the resistance to consultee defensiveness, a dispositional attribution. Defensiveness, then, can be thought of as a concept which results, in part, from cognitively based actor-observer attribution differences.

Factor V -- <u>The tendency to give greater weight to negative than to positive characteristics of persons we are emotionally close to</u>

Miller's (1944) theory of approach-avoidance behavior postulates that the avoidance gradient is steeper than the approach gradient. Thus, at some distance from the object, an animal will have a tendency to approach the goal that has both reinforcing and punishing characteristics, but will have a tendency to avoid this goal when it is close at hand. If we think of evaluative judgments as response tendencies, then it follows that for a distant person (a stranger) the positive characteristics of the person are weighted more heavily than the negative characteristics in impression formation. However, as the evaluating person gets closer to the evaluated other, negative aspects of their behavior take on increasingly greater weight. Wegner and Vallacher (1977) report research that supports the fact that this phenomenon does occur in social judgment. Cognitive explanations for this behavior focus on either the vigilance hypothesis (i.e. negative characteristics of persons we depend upon, or must deal with, have greater adaptive implications than positive characteristics) or a figure-ground hypothesis (i.e. negative events in social interaction are more unusual than positive ones, thus they stand out and are more vivid in perception and memory).

Relating this analysis to the consultation situation it can be seen that the consultee (e.g. a teacher) is psychologically closer to the client (e.g. a student) than is the consultant. Therefore, the consultee is more likely to focus on the negative characteristics of the client than is the consultant. There will be, then, a natural tendency for conflict in point of view of these parties and, as a result, a lessened tendency for the consultee to accept the analysis of the consultant.

If we follow the analysis one step further, the consultant is closer, psychologically, to the consultee than to the client. Therefore, there will be a tendency to accentuate the negative aspects of the consultee's behavior. This, in combination with the tendency to evaluate as less crucial the negative characteristics of the client focused on by the consultee leads the consultant to see the consultee as the source of the problem and the focus of remedial efforts. However, the consultee sees the client as the appropriate focus for remedial efforts. Given these tendencies, resistance on the part of the consultee is to be expected.

Conclusion

Five principles of cognitive social psychology have been presented to show that resistance in consultation can be understood in terms of the cognitive tendencies of human beings as opposed to the simple face-saving, self-serving, motivational hypothesis that is most often entertained in such cases. It is the writer's belief that when resistance is understood in this light, not only will consultants devise better methods of consultation, but also, the self-serving negative aspects of the defensiveness hypothesis made by consultants can be avoided.

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